

Wing-flutter, Air-sweep and Human Breath: The Ethics of Voice and Encounter in Australian Studies

Gail Jones

How might we connect poetics to civic ethics? How might we imagine responses to the modest requests of the “Voice Referendum”¹ that recognise the aspiration to constitute a *newly listening* subject? This essay considers ideas of encounter in both cross-cultural experience and oral and written texts. It examines symbolic aspects of embodiment to question the efficacy of literary-theoretical language and poses its case less by argument than by narrative and trope.

We begin by listening. The talk from which this essay derives opened with an extract from a performance by William Barton, a didgeridoo player from NW Queensland (near Mt Isa) and a violinist, Véronique Serret, originally from Mauritius.² The music is from a piece called *Kalkani*. In Kalkadunga, William Barton’s language, Kalkani means ‘eagle.’ Wing-flutter, air-sweep, human breath and wind: all combine in a rich field of vocalisations. In this context voice is not singular but multiple; voice refers to the creaturely, and to place, as well as to the human subject.

My method derives from this performance, characterised by riff and drone. Riff is the jazzy pattern of improvisation, renewal and recapitulation; drone, less familiar perhaps, is not a pejorative (as in ‘droning speech’), but refers to didgeridoo throb and the pulse of base-line feeling in which there is an *affective depth* and a setting of tone. The didgeridoo³ involves deep body resonance and its sound is produced by circular breathing. It is not propulsive burst, like a trumpet, but assertively continuous. It is subtle, virtuosic, breath-full and inventive.

The Voice Referendum proposal was understood by many as a sensible return to the politics of reconciliation and a practical means by which to acknowledge First Nations wisdom and advice. My own speaking position is non-Indigenous, and my contribution is intended as respectful and

¹ Note: this essay was written in the aura of cautious hope, before the referendum in Australia on October 14, 2023. It derives from a talk given to EASA in Majorca in September 2023.

The wording of the referendum was this:

A Proposed Law:

To alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice

Do you approve this proposed alteration?

The referendum, a historically powerful opportunity to move reconciliation forward, was defeated. The proposal was rejected nationally and by a majority in every state, thus failing to secure the double majority required for amendment by section 128 of the Constitution.

² ABC Classic. “Music for Didgeridoo and Violin, Performed by William Barton and Véronique Serret.” YouTube, 20 November 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34gM8vSXksA>

³ Didgeridoo is a generic term. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese used the term *yidaki* to describe the instrument given to him by Galarrwuy Yunupingu before Yunupingu’s death on April 3, 2023. This is the Yolgnu term—however, there are 45 regional names for this instrument. It is also a male instrument—traditionally it is taboo for women to play the didgeridoo.

mindful, from the outside, necessarily, but in ardent solidarity. Just as the Barton/Serret piece combines Australian and European instruments (indigeneity and the global settler south) and encodes a particular idea of ‘combinatory listening,’ so I am interplaying conceptually a view of voice-becoming-meaning.

The 2023 EASA conference⁴ was based on the recognition of affect within our intellectual endeavours. Models of encounter take for granted affect, improvisation and circumstantial understanding. Affect is not *inherent* in objects or situations as fixed models of the real. It centres rather on social performance and inter-subjectivity. In connection—between people and people, people and place, people and environments—affect is relational not essential; it is fluctuating, not fixed; it is contingent and even at times, haphazard. Affect studies has developed a heuristic rhetoric—of positive terms like attachment, attunement and resonance; and a recognition of negative feelings (the so-called ugly feelings like shame, disgust, anxiety and dread). What follows narrativises subjectivity and embodiment in affective encounters.

(I) Smoke and Trace

In late October 2019, just before the world locked down, I witnessed the performance of presence and deep time.

At the invitation of the Australian Embassy in Berlin I travelled to Leipzig to witness the handback by the Grassi museum of 45 ancestral human remains to their rightful custodians, in this case three tribal groups, the Gunaikurnai in Victoria, the Menang in Western Australia and the Ngarrindjeri in South Australia. These groups had been identified as descendants by forensics—both medical and anthropological; German science was in the service, we might say, of restorative justice and restitution.

I wrote a short article on this event for *The Guardian* newspaper (“Cleansing Ceremonies in Germany”) and what struck me, above all, was the dignity of the occasion.⁵ The remains were held in modest white boxes, draped in the Aboriginal flag. Arranged together, they formed the shape of a single coffin. This was a funeral, of sorts, with appropriate solemnity and ceremony. The museum turned off their smoke detectors so that the whole building could be smoked in a cleansing ceremony led by Ngarrindjeri elder Major Sumner (Uncle Moogy).

So what did Uncle Moogy say? That bodily traces are fully human and without the erosion of time. Even fragile hair samples, gathered in 1880, betoken full humanity and inspire feelings of care and custodianship. Indigenous belief preserves (the present tense was used throughout) the status of traces as person, not as object.

Led by Dr Birgit Scheps-Bretschneider, a forensic team was able to discover age, gender, injuries, illnesses and even, in some cases, cause of death; and also genetically to establish descendants. (Dr Scheps-Bretschneider had by then worked at the Grassi museum, with the

⁴ “‘Australia from the Heart’: Envisioning Affective, Environmental, and Material Reparations,” Palma, September 2023. The author wishes to acknowledge the extraordinary work done by Astrid Schwegler-Castañer and Paloma Fresno-Calleja in establishing the conference as a model of both efficiency and respectful listening.

⁵ An image of the event can be found in the *The Guardian* article: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentsfree/2019/nov/29/cleansing-ceremonies-in-germany-mark-a-homecoming-and-a-shift-in-cultural-understanding>.

Oceania Collection, for 41 years.) When I interviewed German audience members, they mentioned their surprise at the radical contemporaneity of feeling. “I was most moved,” one woman whispered to me, “when I was told that the dead are here, among us, here, in this room. I had never thought about museum exhibits in this way before.” Walter Benjamin reminds us that the trace carries—paradoxically—nearness and incorporation:

The trace is the appearance of nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is the appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us. (Buck-Morss 477)

I am almost embarrassed to be employing such a famous quote, and this might read now as a reductive formulation or indeed as old-fashioned continental theory. But it does seem pertinent here because we are obliged to reconsider ontology. Hair is person, skull is person; even modified objects, such as a skull decorated and used as a drinking cup, still retains its status as person. Repatriation is therefore hinged on the concept of *rehumanisation* and on the ontological transvaluation of trace. This might be understood as a *metaphysical materialism*. (a term that sounds oxymoronic—but indicates special ontology.) Leipzig was of course one of the centres for the racialised anthropology that laid the groundwork for German antisemitic laws of 1935.

So why do I begin here? Because I saw officials become teary. Because I myself was overcome. Because even this highly formal event enabled the reformation of mourning. It enabled the victim’s truth to become, in some way, evident. The sociologist Klaus Neumann reminds us that Hannah Arendt, reporting on the Eichmann trial, insisted that “[t]he purpose of the trial is to render justice, and nothing else” (147) but that now, more than half a century later, we have a deeper sense of the many forums in which witness is not legal or punitive, so much as about speaking, occasions of speaking other voices and other truths. What Neumann calls *victim truth* (with a footnote to remind us that this does not necessarily mean all victims will be heard). Speaking ceremonies are not all legal or juridical—nor do they need to be, to have political effect. To this understanding we might add the *affective* encounter: unbound from prosecution, re-sited within another kind of economy, the metaphor of hearing other voices is given new valency. Considered as a gift economy, the Indigenous people visiting Leipzig were gifting forgiveness, gifting largesse of spirit made possible by the laying to rest, as it were.

Uncle Moogy’s speech generously addressed the European audience as family (“my brothers, my sisters”), bestowing a kind of honorary, trans-historical kinship. It was *his* spiritual largesse, not the beneficence of the museum, that set the affective tone of the moment. And presence was signified as much by smoke as by physical remains: there was a collapse, if you like, of orders of substance: again this might be thought of as metaphysical materialism (or, perhaps, a materialist metaphysics).

(II) Happy Mourning

As a young woman, about thirty, I spent some time on South Goulburn Island, in a community known by locals as Warruwi. It is located in the Arafura sea off the coast of Arnhem land. This is an unusual community, because within a population of only about 450 people, ten distinct languages are spoken, all of them at risk.⁶

It was in this place that I was invited to participate in a ‘happy ceremony,’ a ceremony that marked the end of mourning. An important elder had died about twelve months before, and now, there were song cycles and dances throughout the night, the drinking of kava (a drug derived from a plant-called *piper methysticum*, which is native to the Pacific. It has a long history in the region and is central to many Pacific Islander cultures). At dawn there was a mock battle with flour bombs, a general uproariousness, and permission to speak the name of the dead man again. I personally found the long night exhausting, but the jubilation and silly behaviour at the end of a night of ceremonies—a kind of abreaction, a discharge of repressed and anxious sorrow—was exhilarating, even for an outsider like me.

I was struck by the emotional intelligence of the event, that there might be communal permission to be happy again after serious grief, and that, unlike my culture, in which grief is mostly privatised and sequestered, and may, as Freud reminds us, become pathological—here was collective relief; here was exuberant return to play and vivacity.

I have written of this experience before (“Without Stars”), but now, many years later, realise how lucky I was simply to have been included, how the premise of return to animation and liveliness was wise performance of the other-side of grief; the inversion of corrosive introjection by a kind of explosive projection of emancipated feeling. The next day everyone in the small community was dopey with tiredness; we were subdued but also released; and the dead elder, given back his name, was now spoken of with an almost jokey and mischievous relaxation. I recall here Sara Ahmed’s little essay on happiness, how she insists that affective encounters “begin with the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near” (Ahmed, 30). Happiness in this model is conjured by groups, by participation, by encounters in sociality. Indigenous communities are so often described in narratives of grief and trauma: I wanted to include the comic and joyous element as part of the affective range we might consider.

In 2006 it was discovered that this community, Warruwi, is the site—indeed a paradigmatic global site—of a phenomenon known as *receptive multilingualism*. This term refers to a speaker who, knowing other languages, chooses to respond in her own (Singer 2018). A linguist from ANU, Ruth Singer, began her research when she realised that a husband and wife team, whom she had befriended at Warruwi, each spoke ten languages but never spoke the same language to each other.⁷

⁶ According to Michael Erard, a linguist, there are 500 people and nine languages spoken. See “The Small Island Where 500 People Speak Nine Different Languages,” *The Atlantic*, November 26, 2018. A documentary film by David Grubin, *Language Matters with Bob Holman*, states there are 400 people and ten languages.

⁷ The images the couple drew to help the Balanda linguist understand what she was hearing can be found in Singer’s open access article “A Small Speech Community” (figures 4 and 5): <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2018.05.002>

This research finding—already remarkable, already symbolic—evidences sophisticated operations of speaking and listening; it is a kind of marvel of improvisation and flexibility. (Here we might recall some of those recent studies in Australian literature, for example, Dorothee Klein’s book on the Poetics of Relationality in Aboriginal fiction in which she begins with Alexis Wright’s citation of Glissant’s model.) We must take cognizance of the symbolic system of affect regulation and expression, one that links profoundly to honouring ancestors, to prohibitions and permissions, and to the emotional health, as it were, of a small community.

I show these figures to illustrate the complexity of traditional Indigenous linguistic skills (and this idea that language might reside in different parts of the body). I was entirely ignorant and uncomprehending of this complexity, of what I was witnessing (or hearing) and what I might have learnt. And now, years after the ceremony, I think in terms of vulnerability and beholdenness to other peoples’ stories—these are two terms Judith Butler uses in her “giving an account of oneself”⁸ in which she insists that the narrative self is not an exercise in constructing coherency, but in meeting what is incoherent in the self that allows the listener to other’s stories to properly experience a poetics of relation that occurs circumstantially. Butler draws on continental philosophy to create a moral theory of narrative which engages a groundwork of ethical relations: that we preserve the opacity of others, that we not presume too much, and that we concede the intractable limits of self-understanding. The need for “vulnerability” and “beholdenness” seems especially compelling in encounters in which one might wish to redress power imbalance, or humbly to learn.

(III) Physical History

In 2011, I was in Bunaba country, 350 kilometres east of Broome. The site was Windjana Gorge in the Kimberly region and the country was familiar to me—corrugated pindan roads, tormented looking boabs, blossoming wattle, occasional glimpses of bright yellow kapok flowers. Brahmin cattle wandered with vague insouciance along and across the roads, and there were wallabies here and there, fleeing the sound of vehicles. It was well-watered country, host to freshwater crocodiles and lavish birdlife. For me this was a return to some of the scenes of my childhood—so it was intensified by nostalgia and bouts of involuntary memory. “Neither childhood nor future grows any smaller... Superabundant being wells up in my heart”—even Rilke returned (I cite this to demonstrate about how education meets place in astonishing ways).

I travelled to Winjana to witness the staging of *Jandamurra*, a play honouring the life of the Bunaba lawman and warrior who led a battle of resistance against colonial settlers from 1894 to 1897. It was performed *in situ*, as it were, and *in Language*—Bunaba, of which only about 100 speakers remain, and also in fragments of English, Pidgin and Kriol.⁹ The custodian of the oral tale, Banjo Woorunmurra, died in 2003 (Peterson and Woorunmurra).

⁸ Butler’s idea is derived in any way from Glissant’s model of relations—she employs continental philosophy, Levinas and so on.

⁹ Written by Steve Hawke, with linguistic collaboration, it is a testament to the persistence and vitality of Indigenous history, since the story still exists in an oral version and the generosity of Kimberly people have enabled it to be shared and reanimated. Big mobs from Looma, Mowanjum, Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing attend a lively welcome to country. Full details in my account of the journey in Gail Jones, “The Legend of Jandamurra,” *The Monthly*, October 6, 2011.

The theatrical performance anatomised colonial frontier relations and included a magical version of events. Jandamarra led guerrilla-style resistance to white pastoral settlement, and also achieved status as a *Jalnggan/gurru*, a man of magic power. Named Pigeon by his adversaries, in his own country he was a figure of legendary acts, attributed the power of flight, inhuman strength and invisibility. He was wounded but initially survived a shoot-out at Windjana Gorge, and was eventually killed at Baraa (Tunnel Creek), after which his severed head was displayed as a trophy in Derby. It is a bleak, rather bloody and complicated tale; but the theatrical production, performed outdoors at the Windjina Gorge, to a mostly local audience, was the return and celebration of their own story. Wing beat and bird shape were projected onto rock, as was historical footage of black men of the region in chains. To be among this audience was to sense again the material metaphysics by which rock surface becomes vision, and voice flies atemporally and multilingually, between past, present and future.

The day following the performance my older brother and I, in a more personal tribute, entered Tunnel Creek to follow Jandamurra's final trail. We pushed our bodies in water, sometimes up to our necks, through the rock formation where Jandamurra was hunted and killed. There were bats, birds, sometime crocodiles attending (though I saw none there) and the arduous drag of the body towards a circle of light at the end of the tunnel. (This image¹⁰ does not reflect the beauty of the site, and the opening, at the end, into an illuminated billabong, a brightly luminous, hidden and placid space.)

So I was performing with my own body a kind of honour, but also learning how comparatively weak whitefellas are, how much courage might be required to enter a space like this with a gunshot wound, imagining too how violating it would have been to the community to learn of Jandamurra's decapitation, of being made object.

Not all of us have the opportunity or privilege to visit the origin of a story, but I do like to think of reading too as a kind of radical listening. I am a fiction writer who rarely uses the first-person point of view and my work is often composed of layers of narrative derived from mingling or adjacent cultural spaces. I am somewhat pedantic, given to quotation and allusion; and in my academic work sometimes too theoretical. But in this case I want only to imagine what might be the dire condition of a single man fleeing colonial violence. The fiction writer in me wants to affirm the bird transmogrification: the warrior indeed became bird, and the memory of apotheosis, held safely in oral versions, is the narrative means of rescuing Jandamurra from the indignity of dismemberment. And in keeping with my initial methodological recommendation of the trope of riff: I am still riffing on this idea of dismemberment and restitution and asking what role narrative plays in re-membering the body.

(IV) The Voice to Parliament

The Uluru Statement from the Heart was read out, voiced, proclaimed, on May 26, 2017. The full history of Indigenous pleas to be heard can be found in an activist handbook by Thomas Mayo and Kerry O'Brien; there too one might read the full text, inscribed here¹¹ on canvas and carried and shown at communities throughout the nation. The formal statement

¹⁰ The image can be accessed in the Gallery section of the website of the WA Parks and Wildlife Service of Dimalurru (Tunnel Creek): <https://exploreparks.dbca.wa.gov.au/park/dimalurru-tunnel-creek-national-park>

¹¹ See the Uluru Statement from the Heart on the website: <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/statement-interactive>

begins “we, coming ... from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart.” This is not a sentimental or decorative language. In Indigenous semantics this links sky and body; it indicates what, for example, in Yolgnu is called *djang*, an *alignment* of energy,¹² in which feeling, looking and knowing have an assumed equivalence. The invasion of Australia coincided with the high point of European romanticism: this correlation has always interested me. In Wordsworth’s poem *Excursion* (1814), he speaks of “authentic tidings of invisible things” (387); there is a confidence in European romanticism that the body might be attuned to an “active Principle”: “To every Form of being,” Wordsworth writes, “is assigned an active Principle” (387). This principle is here too in a much older form—and *as* epistemology, not just as an aesthetic; the way tremors in the body of breath and heart link to the shimmer on the surface of the water—refraction, sparkle—of a billabong, which in turn links to the far-blinking twinkle of the stars. This in turn is evidenced in Raark, the cross hatching of bark paintings, so that inner body, water, place and sky, are all there in art practice, co-adjacent and in concatenation. All are part of the same aestheticised intellectual dimension (and in my view far more exciting than European romanticism).

Big Bill Neidjie,¹³ a Kakadu elder, was the last speaker of his language, Gaagudju.¹⁴ When he says: *Have a look star because that’s the feeling...* he is asserting the eco-poetics that the disenchanted world has lost, and in a ‘foreign’ language. Neidjie’s book, *Story of Feeling*,¹⁵ transcribed from his oral wisdom, is in my view an Australian classic and utterly crucial in my encounter through text with Indigenous Australian meanings. Romanticism is not the pre-emptive system; each is a culturally sophisticated phenomenology; and each wishes Form crucially to signify as (a mode of) authentic (or authenticated) meaning. In Neidjie’s book simple words carry a spiritual vitalism, a highly elaborated worldview, and an insistence on connection and circulating continuity.

Well I’ll tell you about this story,
About story where you feel ... laying down

Tree, grass, star...
Because star and tree working with you.
We got blood pressure
But same thing ... spirit on your body,
But e working with you.
Even nice wind e blow ... having a sleep...
Because that spirit he with you.

This story e can listen carefully, e can listen slow.
In the city well I suppose lots of houses,
You can hardly look this star

¹² There is an excellent account of *djang* in the exhibition catalogue of the work of master painter John Mawurndjul: *John Mawurndjul: I am the old and the new* (Art Gallery of South Australia, 2018). This book includes translations by Dr Murray Garde of the artist’s own account of his beliefs, in Kunijku, into English. A Yolgnu word for ‘shimmer’ directly links art work to water, stars and body.

¹³ Mark Lang’s picture of Bill Neidjie (2000) can be seen at <https://portrait.gov.au/portraits/2008.84/bill-neidjie>

¹⁴ See Neidjie and George.

¹⁵ See Morrissey.

But might be one night you look.
Have a look star because that's the feeling.
String, blood ... though your body.

That star he working there ... see?
E working. I can see.
Some of them small, you cant hardly see.
Always at night, if you lie down...
Look careful, e working ... see?
When you sleep ... blood e pumping. (2-3)

E is a non-specific pronoun that signifies grammatically the undifferentiated subject: this is *animism in grammar*. Niedjie, the last speaker of his own native language, is transliterating his grammar into Aboriginal English. Star is equivalent to tree and to grass and to the body lying on the earth: all are *co-animate*, all create what might be described as a meridian of the body.¹⁶

In the context of the call for a First Nations Voice to be enshrined in the Australian constitution, it seems important to acknowledge this idea of creative connection. Indigenous Australians are a small percentage of the population, so they have called on other Australians, the non-Indigenous multicultural majority, for support in achieving recognition in what will be an immensely important decision in the life of the nation. Non-Indigenous citizens are called upon to listen and to act. *This story e can listen carefully, e can listen slow*.

So in this momentous year I find myself thinking in both narrative and theoretical terms. I hesitate to pronounce—my hesitation is clear in my opening remarks and in the shyness with which I am introducing smatterings of theory—but at this point I want to return to the digeridoo playing with the violin, to the idea of syncretic or combinatory voice (a voice born of solidarity) and to the riff on encounters (social and textual) that include affective address. Following the work of Rita Felski—her critique of the hermeneutics of suspicion—I have lately been reading the work of German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, who has revived the concept of resonance (which he figures as a kind of listening) as a critique of modernity, alienation, and reified relations. Resonance, he argues, is the opposite of alienation because it values affect, connection and the movement of feeling. It has properties of “self-efficacy,” linking us as active agents back to the world; of “transformation,” becoming more definite and more aware, and finally of “uncontrollability.”¹⁷ Resonance cannot be enforced, controlled or fabricated. It is the moment of innovation, in which something happens to us; and indeed it leads, he suggests, to an ethics. Resonance starts with the other and preserves precious alterity. I would also like to mention the work of Michael Rothberg, who theorises the holocaust alongside post-colonial models of memory, identity and subject position (*Multidirectional Memory; The Implicated Subject*). His idea that there is multidirectional memory, that memory is not the property of pre-existing groups but that groups come into formation through performative articulation—has been

¹⁶ This is Philip Morrissey's insight, to which I am indebted.

¹⁷ Rosa refers to this mutual openness in a metaphorical manner as listening–response. Accordingly, a relationship based on the notion of listening–response can be referred to as a resonant relationship. In the tradition of Critical Theory, Rosa places more emphasis on mutuality than on openness in terms of the concept of resonance, meaning not only that he regards listening–response as essential but also that the two parties listening and responding must be unique and retain their distinctiveness. For a critical revision of Hartmut Rosa's resonance theory, see Cheng.

assumed in this topic; likewise, his refiguring of ideas of responsibility through what he calls the “implicated subject.”

I mention these thinkers only briefly to indicate how, revising or relativising my own literary-theoretical training, I have wanted to insist on the poetic and the narrative as fundamental axes of understanding. Bill Neidjie’s plea, *Have a look star because that’s the feeling*, is the invitation to an epistemic challenge, to acknowledge exorbitant localism and to relativise European knowing. Another way to think about this is with the help of critical resilience studies (I am thinking of Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos’s book¹⁸ critiquing the idea that adaptation to trauma is resilience.)

So now, by way of conclusion, back to the digeridoo. The line notes to William Barton and Veronique Serret’s work mentions the “aural eagle (that) really does dip and soar on inscrutable, invisible currents.” This idea of an aural eagle, the way a solid bird becomes a sound, the idea that there is a field of listening, as well as a field of vocalisations, the recognition that this might be a shared creation, between Indigenous wisdom and the global settler south; these are to me exciting notions. Exciting because they value not material wealth but cultural wealth; because there is a promise here of reconciliation through imaginative collaboration, and because feeling—like that fizzing elated feeling we experience when we see a bird rise high, is recommended as art, as meaning, and as both tribute and respect.

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¹⁸ Ana Maria Fraile Marcos’s introduction to *Glocal Narratives of Resilience and Healing* (Routledge, 2021) argues against the Neo-liberal co-option of resilience to focus on things like memory as the location of another of resilience.

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Gail Jones is the author of two short-story collections and nine novels, which include *Sixty Lights*, *Dreams of Speaking*, *Sorry*, *The Death of Noah Glass*, *Salonika Burning* and *One Another*. Her work has been highly awarded in Australia and also shortlisted for international prizes, including the Dublin IMPAC and the Prix Femina Étranger. She is Professor Emerita of Western Sydney University and Visiting Professorial Fellow at Australian National University (ANU).

Email: gail.jones@westernsydney.edu.au